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Vassar College

When Women Whisper: Rumor and Gossip as Transcripts of Resistance

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Bachelor of Arts in Sociology

by

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Thesis Adviser:

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the following thesis, I explore rumor and gossip as discourses of resistance in the context of sexual violence. I discuss the definitions of these forms of communication from which I construct my own understanding. I submit that rumor and gossip are unverifiable, unofficial, and network-based. I then analyze several cases in which rumor and gossip are used to convey information pertaining to safety. These cases date from the antebellum South to more contemporary examples of what is commonly called the “whisper network.” My methodology is rooted in discourse analysis, media studies, and sociological theory. I argue that in these cases, rumor and gossip are critical tools that can subvert dominant narratives and catalyze critiques of power. This thesis is fundamentally concerned with disrupting hegemonic narratives by centering communication that is often dismissed or stigmatized. From this, I produce a theory of rumor and gossip which works to restore agency and integrity to its participants.

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## INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, when I walk around Vassar's campus, I play a game—how much information can I bring to mind about the people I cross paths with? Given the size of the campus, the heterogeneity of the students, and an abundance of other factors, I'm constantly amazed by how much social information is transferred among and across different groups. Since my freshman year, I have accumulated a wealth of knowledge about the personal lives of my peers—and not just from their class introductions or Moodle posts. My learning comes from less “official” sources—from whispers, Facebook posts, anonymous lists, tentative warnings; in other words, it comes from rumor and gossip. These networks of information have been central to my experiences as a college student, and as I navigate my existence on this campus, which is daily filled with conversations and transfers of information, I've been keeping tabs in my head: what is gossip and rumor, and why do we engage in it? How do we understand these forms of communication as positive or negative, shameful or necessary, productive or destructive?

I was thinking about these questions at the beginning of my junior year when the #MeToo movement went viral on Twitter. As women stepped forward to share the knowledge that had circulated among them for years, the impact spread far beyond Hollywood. I'm sure that my friends and I were not the only ones glued to the Internet, watching as the world grappled with the flood of sexual assault allegations. And I'm sure that I'm not the only one who made connections to my own life. Since I've been at Vassar, I've noticed that many of us deal with rape culture the same way we deal with other things—through talking about it, quietly, with our close friends. In the same spaces that we gossip about the weekend hookups, we also talk about the overheard aggression, the drunken gray areas, the boys that preach consent but practice violence. We speak in these liminal spaces about the impossibilities of our lives—the facts that

are not official but that we know to be true. In other words, we use rumor and gossip as informal means through which to resist such conditions of harm.

I have watched networks of gossip and rumor operate in contradictory and unexpected ways over my four years here. And in the classroom, I have learned what is at stake in this communication. Throughout Sociology courses focusing on systems of domination, I have grown to understand the extent of rape culture within our society. As I consider the implications of that knowledge—for example, if I try to count how many people I am close to who have been violated sexually—it becomes clear that some gossip is not trivial, but is, in fact, essential to maintaining safety. In this thesis, I seek to integrate that understanding into a critical analysis of rumor and gossip as tools of those oppressed by sexual violence. A principal argument of this thesis is that these forms of communication are: 1) *unverifiable*, 2) *unofficial*, and 3) *network-based*.

In this thesis, I argue that rumor and gossip are modes of communication that facilitate solidarity and a critique of domination among marginalized groups. Specifically, my argument centers on "whisper networks." These unsanctioned channels allow for women to transmit information necessary for their physical and emotional safety. I argue that the intent of these spaces is fundamental to their meaning and also contributes to their stigmatization. Many of the narratives of such networks and lists are appropriated into stories about manipulative, angry women who refuse to play fair, and rumor and gossip are used to label this communication as invalid and immoral. I approach the issue with a different framework, in which rumor and gossip are seen as productive due to their status as partially hidden. Ultimately, I argue for the agency of women who choose to talk about their stories, regardless of the consequences.

By their very definition, whisper networks are sub rosa. As soon as they are made public, they are altered by myriad power dynamics. It is, of course, the secrecy of these networks that give them power as fugitive spaces within an atmosphere of silencing. So in pursuing this project, I have chosen two case studies in which whisper networks were made public. These case studies also demonstrate how the very process of whispering – of engaging in "women's talk" – can be intrinsically healing and transformative. To emphasize this quality, I focus on the unfolding of these stories rather than their material results. A deep understanding of how these networks form, and why they are relegated to whispers, requires an exploration of the days and weeks after they are made public before they are given alternate histories or erased from institutional memories. At the same time, I hope to complicate some of these networks by articulating how they often exist within privileged institutions.

I start by asking, and attempting to answer, the same questions that started me on this journey: What is gossip? What is rumor? My first chapter provides a review of the literature on gossip and rumor within sociology, integrated with my own understanding of the terms. I examine how gossip is theorized in relation to gender, and ultimately argue that both rumor and gossip are unofficial, unverifiable and network-based. As such, they subvert hegemonic knowledge.

In my second chapter, I expand on gossip and rumor by introducing the idea of whisper networks and hidden transcripts. I argue that these different modes of communication can be deployed by certain groups within oppressive contexts. Using Scott (1990) to introduce the idea of the dominant narrative, I show how alternative communication can disrupt existing hierarchies. I then provide a cursory history of the institutionalization of sexualized violence as context for resistance against it. Within this discussion, I hope to highlight the legacy of speaking

out. Together, chapters One and Two ultimately establish a theoretical framework in which rumor and gossip are conceptualized as discourse that subverts the normalization of sexual violence.

In Chapter Three, I engage with a case from Brown University in 1990 called the Brown Rape List, in which students wrote the names of their assaulters and harassers on a bathroom stall door. Relying heavily on student voices from the *Brown Daily Herald*, I offer a summary of what happened from multiple sides of the story. I then use student comments to demonstrate the different implications of the list for students at Brown as well as the discussion on sexual assault nationally. I also look to policy changes at Brown to show the multiple layers of change that these lists can engender. Then, in Chapter Four, I fast forward to the #MeToo movement. I look at the Shitty Media Men spreadsheet from October 2017. In this analysis, I again rely on the voices of women involved, as well as popular commentary on the Internet. After developing my analysis of Shitty Media Men, I connect it to the Brown Rape List and consider the role of technology in each case.

From here, I transition into a conclusion considering what all of this *means*. What are the cases in which rumor and gossip don't work? What is yet to come? Certainly, whisper networks have numerous implications for many different actors. How can we imagine a future in which rape lists are not necessary?



## CHAPTER ONE: ELUSIVE DEFINITIONS OF RUMOR AND GOSSIP

In 1888 the girls of North Hall, Newnham, debated the question of whether life without gossip would be worth living. The vote was unanimously negative, and Miss Gladstone, the principal, defended this most just decision.  
(Lumley 1925:212).

In my sophomore year of college, my best friend proposed that we go one full week without my favorite vice: gossip. I bristled at the suggestion, but some of our other friends were enthusiastic, the general consensus being that gossip is undoubtedly negative and without it, we would all be better people and certainly better women. As they made the pact, I pushed back—what exactly counts as gossip? Are you allowed to share stories from your day? None of my friends could quite articulate an answer. Neither could they explain to me the exact reasoning behind the sentiment that gossip is “bad.” Frustrated, I gave up on trying to convince my friends, but since that moment I’ve been trying to answer those questions for myself. In this thesis, I offer a defense of gossip and rumor by finally articulating what I wish I could’ve said two years ago.

I define rumor and gossip as unofficial, unverifiable, and network-based modes of communication. By existing outside of formal discourse, participants are able to spread information that may subvert, or present a threat to, hegemonic conceptions of truth. I specifically concentrate on how women use these tools of communication as a strategy to assure protection within patriarchal systems of violence by circulating information that shares a common theme: stay away from that boy! I heard he’s bad news. Using social media, oral communication, and graffiti, I argue that rumors and gossip are circulated among those who need

to hear them. In this chapter, I begin by discussing how rumor and gossip are different, especially as related to gender. I then transition into their shared traits, as defined above.

### *Gossip and Rumor: What's the Difference?*

Gossip and rumor are defined inconsistently across the literature of social science, where they are contrasted or conflated on various terms. Given that there is no clearly agreed upon distinction between the two, I consider them both to represent, within the context of this thesis, informal and unverifiable exchanges of information. But before I explore my own definition in full, it is important to discuss how rumor and gossip have been theorized, and put into conversation with each other, in existing scholarship.

DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) make the following distinction:

Rumors are unverified and potentially useful information statements in circulation that arise in ambiguous, threatening and potentially threatening contexts that help people make sense and manage threat. Gossip is evaluative social chat about individuals that arises in the context of forming, changing or maintaining social networks, and functions to inform, bond, exclude, enhance status and convey social norms (p. 27-8).

To a point, these distinctions can be useful. Rumor is conceptualized as a collective form of sharing unverifiable information, whereas gossip operates individualistically. But it is difficult to maintain this distinction in every scenario, and even the authors admit that “nebulous” forms exist in which there is no clear delineation between rumor and gossip (p. 28). This admission indicates how, even among scholars focused on finding their differences, the terms cannot be entirely untangled.

Since rumor and gossip are so closely related, I use them interchangeably within this thesis. This decision enables me to focus on the resistant qualities of unofficial communication without stumbling over the subtleties of definition. I additionally choose to use both terms with

the recognition that they are often valued differently within the literature. For instance, DiFonzo and Bordia (2007) argue that “rumor is considered by discussants as a topic of some urgency, significance or usefulness,” while “gossip...is typically perceived by participants as less significant. Rumor is like news in that it is of interest to people but gossip is considered ‘idle chatter’” (p. 28). This assertion points to how gossip is traditionally conceptualized as negative, whereas rumor is free from this association and thus more valid. This is evidenced as well by the extent to which each communication form is theorized: gossip is usually discussed within a moralistic framework (Rogoff 1995:59), whereas rumor is explored much more broadly.

This different valuation is rooted in gossip’s gendered association. Because it is seen as feminine and thus invalid, it is difficult to accurately assess its relationship to rumor without perpetuating that stigmatization (Snorton 2014). Because my thesis is focusing specifically on how groups of women use rumor and gossip, I wish to briefly highlight the relationship between gender and stigmatization before moving into my definitions.

### *Gossip, Gender, and Stigmatization*

In doing research for this thesis, one thing was immediately made clear to me: gossip is linked with femininity. This association is sometimes made explicit and often serves as a basis for the distinction between gossip and rumor. For example, Cifor (2016) argues that much of the literature presents gossip as rumor's diminutive counterpart. Rosnow and Fine (1976) similarly argue that gossip is "small talk," whereas rumor is simply "information." Their definitions don't mention gender, but this distinction points to how gossip is trivialized as frivolous even within academic literature. Rogonoff (1995) contends that the study of gossip is "reviled in relation to empirical and verifiable factualities, relegated to the recesses of femininity or feminized

masculinity and moralized as reprehensible," ultimately meaning that "gossip seems to bear multiple burdens" (p. 58). These burdens are not shared by rumor, which is similar to gossip in many ways but not as closely linked to gender. This association—between gossip and femininity—can be traced back centuries.

Since as early as the thirteenth century, gossip has been feminine by definition within the patriarchal lexicon. Originally used as a noun meaning 'godparent', the word evolved in Middle English to describe the visitors of someone who had just given birth, usually their women friends (Online Etymology Dictionary). In the following years, gossip's meaning expanded, but the alleged participants in the activity did not. In 1818, a popular dictionary defined gossip as a noun meaning "one who runs about tattling like a woman at a lying-in" (Walker 1818:243). A century later, *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* used a similar definition for the verb—"to run about and tattle; to tell idle, esp. personal, tales" (Harris and Allen 1911:934). Though not directly gendered, this definition nevertheless evokes femininity with its description of 'personal tales.' The reputation of women as oversharing and emotional sets the precedent for this coded description, which invokes the image of a woman tattling, not a man.

Given the structural subjugation of women throughout history, labeling something as 'feminine' is not necessarily positive. For example, Graham (2016) describes how Shakespeare used gossip to characterize negative communication, relying on the connotation of the word as "slightly derogatory because it described womanly behavior." When he wanted to actually use a word describing legitimate conversation, he purportedly called it "rumor." This early distinction points to gossip as feminine and demonstrates the values inherent in that categorization. By

choosing rumor to describe “real” conversation and using gossip as negative, Shakespeare perpetuates the stereotype of women's communication as shallow and petty.

Gossip is also associated with sin. Spacks (1985) links the negative views of gossip to the Christian creation myth. She argues that Eve's original sin—eating the apple in the Garden of Eden—can be characterized as the "unwise speaking and unwise listening" that women have since engaged with (p. 41). This argument demonstrates how the stigmatization of gossip and its association with femininity mutually reinforce each other—since women gossip, it is amoral, and since women are amoral, their talk must be gossip.

The stigmatization of gossip can also be understood in the context of patriarchal conceptions of public and private spheres of life. Women are relegated to the private sphere, which includes domesticity, motherhood, and intimacy. Men, on the other hand, are conceptualized within the public sphere as political and economic actors (Kesselman, McNair, Schniedewind 2008:175). This binary also relates to official versus unofficial information. Official information exists in the public sphere, where it is sanctioned by dominant ideals. Unofficial information, like rumor and gossip, circulate in alternative channels that can be understood as private. Yet since they are based in networks, these forms are not categorically private.

Gossiping gives women a tool of communicating that operates outside of the public/private binary, as it is both personal but also by definition shared. To illustrate this relationship further, Spacks (1985) compares the judgment of women's talk to judgments of feminine sexuality. She argues that sex and gossip can both be understood as transgressive acts diverging from traditional notions of privacy and pleasure and that the two are often linked—much gossip is about sex. The disclosure of the existence of sex and gossip is thus regarded as

“perversion[s] of primary forms of human connectedness” (p. 40). These primary forms of human connectedness are conceptualized within a patriarchal, capitalist society, and as such reflect the values of those holding the most social power. In other words, seeing sex and gossip as perversions of human connection is a way to delegitimize experiences that are coded feminine. This ties into my definition of rumor and gossip as *unofficial* and *unverifiable*.

*Private Talk, Women's Talk: Gossip and Rumor as Unofficial and Unverifiable*

Rumor and gossip often proliferate in the absence of official information, and as such, I define them as unofficial and unverifiable. This means that they represent a threat to groups that have a stake in controlling the dominant narrative. By capitalizing on the fact that rumor and gossip are unverifiable, those who are threatened by this communication are able to declare it invalid, often on the basis of gender. In this thesis, I work to undo this effect by presenting rumor and gossip as both defined by and resistant to power dynamics in their use of unofficial information.

Though rumor is not stained by the label of femininity, it is produced in relation to systems of power. Rumor is primarily used to regain control. Allport and Postman (1946) argue that in times of crisis or unrest, in the absence or inadequacy of dominant narratives, rumors are spread among groups trying to make sense of their situations. This emphasis on ambiguity is echoed by recent texts, where scholars have defined rumor as “unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat, that function to help people make sense and manage risk” (DiFonzo and Bordia 2007:20). This is clearly articulated in the following principle:

The principle of external control: Rumors will tend to arise in situations where

developments especially relevant to people's existence lie largely outside their own control (Festinger et al. 1948:483).

This principle is consistent with scholarship on catastrophe and rumor (Prasad 1950; Sinha 1952), which similarly identifies a lack of control or certainty with the proliferation of rumor. In historical rumor scholarship, the principle of external control is often alluded to, identified in one paper as “the product of collective efforts to interpret a problematic situation, when the public views the situation affectively and when authoritative information is lacking” (Peterson and Gist 1951:159).

These perspectives rely on an understanding of how control relates to power. Ordinarily, those in positions of power control the dominant narrative about a given situation. But when there is ambiguous information from these actors, rumor and gossip can be used as a mode of resistance that presents unverifiable and unofficial knowledge. By using these modes of communication as tools, the boundaries of domination shift—those construed as powerless are able to use gossip as unofficial tools that contest patriarchal narratives.

Rather than passive information being transmitted from one object to another, rumor is constructed and maintained by people with agency. Fine (2007) writes that “in cases where information is not crucial, rumor is a form of entertainment, but when information is suppressed, knowledge claims become a form of resistance” (p. 12). Though the author is primarily referring to rumors spread in certain political climates, such as in authoritarian government regimes, the argument holds in other realms as well. I expand on this perspective by arguing that rumor may be used to complicate strategies of domination that subject marginalized groups to violence and are euphemized within official narratives. Conceptualizing rumor in this way demonstrates how it is defined by its relationship to power.

Though these authors discuss rumor exclusively, I argue that all of these qualities hold true for gossip as well. Much of the literature on gossip is occupied with its gendered affiliations, which then leaves no room for the other insights afforded to rumor. By using both terms throughout my thesis, I do not mean to suggest that they are identical. Instead, I contend that they both represent unofficial knowledge.

The potentially destabilizing power of gossip and rumor is further illuminated by Spacks (1985), who notes how gossip is evocative of a “female alliance at least partly antipathetic to men” (p. 35), recognizing the threat of misandry within gossiping communities. The author further points out that the three aspects of gossips most popularly condemned—the circulation of slander, betrayal of secrets, and penetration of privacy—“all embody threats to those made the object of gossip’s discourse” (p. 33). In other words, the condemnation of gossip may be based in an effort to preserve one’s own standing. This makes sense since gossip and rumor are social but also exclusionary—Cifor (2016) asserts that gossip is the practice of exchanging information “within a social group and in the absence the person(s) in question from the change” (p. 3). This means that “those nominally in control, the moralists who articulate society’s view of itself, may feel nervous about what by definition they cannot govern” (Spacks 1985:30). In turn, these actors perpetuate the idea that gossip is invalid as a self-preservation effort, with the ethos that if everyone believed what they heard, we’d all be in a lot of trouble. These perspectives demonstrate how gossip’s stigmatization is a product of the threat it presents to existing systems of power. In the following chapters, I offer numerous case studies that exemplify this theoretical framework.

Donovan (2007), in a review of rumor research from the past century, argues that “rumors act like news, but are distinguished by being primarily disseminated outside the auspices



of formal media or formal organizational authority" (p. 61). Unhindered by the constraints of these formal structures, rumor and gossip exist without any fixed rules. This means that in addition and in part due to being unofficial, rumor and gossip are also unverifiable. Since rumor and gossip exist by definition outside of formal institutions, there is no standard of evidence against which to judge the credibility of rumored information.

But even if rumors are unverifiable, we still often believe them. Fine (2007) asserts that "rumor both derives from and contributes to the social organization of trust" (p. 7). By using unofficial communication that can masquerade as untrue, rumor and gossip actually help build trust--by believing one piece of information and not another, we perpetuate implicit messages about whose narratives and voices are important.

Kapferer (2013) demonstrates how speculation of veracity is actually rooted in bias against talk that threatens the status quo. Defining rumor and gossip as unverifiable raises questions about what counts as knowledge, and who gets to decide. Cifor (2016) notes that "gendered notions of knowledge production have led to discourses and a politics of research in which "detachment, objectivity and rationality" are valued and "implicitly masculinized" while "engagement, subjectivity, passion and desire" are "devalued" and frequently feminized (p. 5). Factoring gender into a discussion of knowledge production facilitates an understanding that the sanctity of 'knowledge' is spurious. The category instead exists as a representation of patriarchal, white supremacist ideology, which rejects information that is subjective and feminine. Thus, being unverifiable does not mean that rumors or gossip are lies. Instead, it means that they offer the chance to convey testimony based on lived experience.

Foss and Foss (1994) argue for the introduction of new forms of knowledge within feminist scholarship. The authors specifically advocate for the admissibility of 'personal

experience' as evidence. VanHaitsma (2016) additionally addresses methodologies of knowing, asserting gossip as evidence within queer and feminist lines of inquiry. These scholars regard gossip as a valid and important exploration of women's experiences and allow me to ground my work in a feminist legacy that prioritizes non-normative ways of knowing. These theoretical interventions undergird my decision throughout this thesis to center gossip and rumor, communication that is not historically the basis of academic knowledge and discovery.

In order to demonstrate that history, I now turn towards scholarship on resistant discourse and provide examples of women speaking out from as early as the nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER TWO: WHISPERS AND LOOPHOLES

In the first chapter of my thesis, I argued that gossip and rumor can be understood as modes of communication that are traditionally theorized in relation to gender stereotypes and may be understood as threatening. But threatening to *what*? In the rest of this thesis, I discuss how rumor and gossip are used to resist sexual violence by creating fugitive networks within systems of domination. By looking at how rumor and gossip are used to talk about rape culture, I argue that these networks of communication actively resist institutionalized abuse and hegemonic ways of understanding domination and violence. In this chapter, I establish the historical and theoretical framework for this argument.

I begin by introducing the concept of hidden and public transcripts (Scott 1990) as a larger lens through which to understand the perpetuation and contestation of dominant and official narratives. I consider rumor and gossip as strategic midway points between the hidden and public transcripts—the spectrum where Scott locates the majority of the political life of subordinate groups (p. 136). Since hidden transcripts are exactly that—hidden—I turn to this spectrum between the poles of hidden and public in order to locate examples of resistant discourse that has been made public. Throughout this chapter, I focus on the literal and metaphorical act of “speaking out,” or making the hidden transcript publicly available.

From here, I specifically name power relations by exploring a history of sexual violence and struggles against it in the United States. Since I do not have the space to delve into a comprehensive analysis, I instead choose several points from history to explore in depth. Each of these moments illustrates the violence of misogyny and white supremacy but also demonstrates the technologies of struggle that have been practiced throughout history. Though these

technologies are not always rumor or gossip, they establish essential context for understanding my argument, as well as my case studies in Chapters Three and Four.

I begin this historical section by citing Sarah Haley (2016) and bell hooks (1982) to examine the sexual exploitation of Black women during and after chattel slavery. These scholars demonstrate the significance of race in the construction of “woman” as a gender category, and I choose this as a starting point in the discussion of sexual violence in order to convey its links to white supremacy. This context is essential in understanding the origins of rape culture, and without it, I risk recreating a brand of feminism that assumes, as Haley and hooks point out, that by ‘woman’ we mean ‘white.’ I rely heavily on these sources to contest that idea. I then introduce the work of resistance by discussing the narrative of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl*. Her garret space represents one of many sites of fugitivity, or *loopholes*, in which those construed as powerless fight against their circumstances.

I then move forward in history to another significant moment in the struggle against sexual violence: the 1991 hearings in which Professor Anita Hill testified against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. This moment marked a shift in how sexual harassment was considered legally. The testimony of Professor Hill additionally represents the process of publicizing a hidden transcript, but in her case, the choice to share this transcript was made for her. This gave it a much different texture than the other examples I refer to in this chapter. Yet Hill’s testimony nonetheless demonstrates how the act of speaking out is itself a radical form of resistance.

From these examples, I turn to the present day politics of hidden transcripts and rape culture. I discuss systems of silencing that discourage women from speaking out (Ahrens 2006), and explore how they continue to do so anyway. I then look at the #MeToo movement, which

has dramatically intervened in dominant narratives about how women are treated. I look to literature on social media as a manifestation of resistance against gender-based violence. I also explore some of the complications of the movement, which has been criticized for its relationship to white supremacy and classism.

This chapter is intended to demonstrate how the history of sexual violence against women is defined by acts of resistance that range from public accusations to more intimate and clandestine moments of solidarity. This analysis indicates the emancipatory potential of gossip for marginalized groups (Goldberg 2019). I end this chapter by introducing the term “whisper networks” to characterize the routes of communication through which hidden transcripts are shared. By citing the conditions under which these networks arise, I argue that whisper networks can be conceptualized as sites of resistance. Moreover, I acknowledge that these sites can replicate systems of oppression and domination, and should be considered critically.

### *Hidden Transcripts*

Scott (1990) examines the contrasting discourses presented in interactions between powerless and powerful groups. He argues that conditions of domination give way to disparate discourses when groups move between private and public spheres. Scott identifies a public transcript, which he calls “the *self*-portrait of dominant elites as they would have themselves seen” (p. 18). Scott refers to “dominant elites,” which I expand to include any group that is afforded a relatively higher position of social power, often based on identity. This self-portrait is constructed by official narratives and perpetuated by dominant and subordinate groups alike. By performing subservience and being unable to safely intervene in the (re)telling of narratives, subordinate groups contribute to the construction of this public transcript.

In contrast to the public transcript, Scott argues that "every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a 'hidden transcript' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" (1990:xii). This transcript represents a space through which to practice autonomy and resistance within larger structures of oppression and domination.

But Scott is careful to clarify that understanding public and hidden transcripts is much more complicated than looking at these two extreme ends of the spectrum. Instead, he contends that hidden transcripts can be created out of a "politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors." Such transcripts are thus located strategically between the private and public. And, as Scott notes, it is these forms that are much easier to study for practical purposes--a completely hidden transcript, by definition, escapes analysis. As such, I locate rumor and gossip as forms of political dialogue that exist in between these private and public spheres. Like the hidden transcript, rumor and gossip are "elaborated among a restricted 'public' that excludes—that is hidden from—certain specified others" (1990:14). Yet often, that secrecy might be compromised, shifting the landscape from a hidden transcript to this in-between. By understanding how rumor and gossip are situated within this framework, I highlight how systems of power necessitate unofficial discourse and action. I also look to testimony as an adjacent discourse of contestation characterized by publicly speaking out about what is usually considered private.

Just as both dominant and subordinate groups partake in the public transcript, each group maintains and develops unique hidden transcripts. While marginalized groups engage in these spaces to critique power and share knowledge that would otherwise be dangerous, dominant groups instead occupy these spaces as refuges in which to "let their hair down" and speak

without fear of having their words used against them. Scott notes that these groups have "much to conceal" as well as the "wherewithal to conceal what they wish" (1990:12). The implication of this statement is that powerful groups can construct a hidden transcript that contradicts the dominant narratives they publicly espouse. In this thesis, I look at sexual violence and argue that the hidden transcript of the subordinate group, in this case, is gossip about dangerous men. The counterpart of this transcript for powerful groups might be "locker room talk," for example. Just as rumor and gossip can be detrimental as well as productive, so too can the hidden transcript become a vehicle by which techniques of domination are strengthened.

Scott recognizes gossip as part of the "infrapolitics" of subordinate groups, which comprises "a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name" (1990:19). Yet he distinguishes gossip from other forms, arguing that it "reinforces normative standards by invoking them and by teaching anyone who gossips precisely what kinds of conduct are likely to be mocked or despised," and additionally that gossip "consists typically of stories that are designed to ruin the reputation of some identifiable person or persons" (1990:142-143). I understand the basis behind these assertions; yet to contest these generalizations is one of the main goals of this thesis. Not only do I argue that gossip can do more than reinforce normative standards in certain contexts, but I also contend that part of its stigmatization comes from its association with femininity. Scott writes that "gossip might be seen as the linguistic equivalent and forerunner of witchcraft," linking it to womanhood only paragraphs after dismissing its worth (1990:143). While Scott offers deep insight into the activity of marginalized groups, his failure to confront his own biases demonstrate the patterns of subordination inherent in patriarchy, even within the social sciences. This follows his own assertion that dominant groups have the "power...to stigmatize activities or persons that seem to

call into question official realities...” (1990:55). Stigmatization is thus a strategic way of undermining the validity of certain narratives that complicate the official story. These narratives are either invisibilized, rewritten, sanitized, sensationalized or presented as incredible and therefore insignificant.

Yet for those who construct and defend the spaces in which these stories can be shared, gossip enables groups to thread together decentralized, nonlinear narratives that together account for the many patterns of domination. In this context, gossip thus serves as a space in which the dominant narrative and the standards it promotes are themselves in limbo, complicating Scott’s idea that gossip always reinforces these standards. Realistically, dominant narratives rationalize systemic violence by explicitly ignoring transcripts that expose it, such as rumor, gossip, and testimony. These omissions can be read as an implicit embrace of the logic that makes sexual violence possible—by refusing to take sides or action, dominant groups condone the larger systems that make such abuse possible. Any discussion of such violence is then impermissible, as it exposes the socially sanctioned methods of domination threaded throughout public transcripts. Gossiping about such violence thus represents a radical departure from normative standards by presenting narratives that expose widespread sexual violence.

Looking at gossip as a hidden transcript in the context of rape culture underscores my argument that it is a resistant form of communication. While I do take issue with Scott’s analysis of gossip, I also consider my thesis to further his research. Scott writes: “My broad purpose is to suggest how we might more successfully read, interpret, and understand the often fugitive political conduct of subordinate groups” (1990:xii). By excavating narratives of resistance and tracing networks of communication, I work to interpret and understand the fugitive work of groups affected by sexual violence. I begin this work by rewinding history.



## *Histories of Violence*

I begin my discussion of sexual violence with an analysis of the historical basis of ‘femininity’ as a concept specifically constructed around whiteness. By looking at the rationalization of sexual violence against women of color, I hope to complicate the case studies I present in Chapters Three and Four, both of which look to the experiences of women within relatively privileged institutions. This starting point is also important as it illustrates the patterns of resistance that are foundational to this legacy of violence. The sources I refer to have been crucial in developing my understanding of how violence against women is rooted in the maintenance of white supremacy. While I cannot adequately explore these conversations here, they are crucial to my argument. I offer a cursory discussion of these topics and encourage everyone to read the cited authors in full.

The institutionalization of sexual violence against women can be traced to patterns of domination practiced by white slaveholders against Black women. hooks (1982) argues that with chattel slavery came the routinization of extreme acts of sexual violence as a form of raced and gendered domination, where white men targeted black women specifically as a demonstration of power that was within the bounds of ‘safety,’ “for he could brutalize and exploit her without fear of harmful retaliation” (p. 18). Abolitionist activist Angela Davis similarly argues that white men did not rape black women during slavery because of sexual desire, but instead as a method of institutionalizing terrorism in order to dehumanize and demoralize black women (as cited in bell hooks 1982:27).

Dr. Sarah Haley (2016) demonstrates how the category of race interacted with gender during and after slavery to construct an explicitly white social ideal of normative femininity. She

argues that black women, as slaves and later prisoners in systems of convict leasing, were stripped of gender by being forced to do labor that is conceptualized as masculine. White women, though surely subject to forms of sexual violence, had the privilege of acting "ladylike" because of their race. Within a white patriarchal system, white women resisted misogyny by clinging to their whiteness.

Haley writes that "Black female injury was an ideological resource for the production of white womanhood as the paragon of gender normativity and the exclusive subject of chivalry" (2016:67). By chivalry, Haley points to the privileging of women's safety only when the women in question were white. White women contested their gendered subjugation by invoking their perceived racial superiority to 'other' Black women. This was further underwritten by stereotypes about who counted as a victim of sexual violence: "since woman was designated as the originator of sexual sin, Black women were naturally seen as the embodiment of female evil and sexual lust" (hooks 1982:33). They were thus presented as deserving of the violence that white woman should be protected from.

This is crucial to understanding contemporary women's movements. In constructing normative femininity as white, Black women were excluded from any narratives of vulnerability or virtue. Fox-Genovese (1988) writes that "violations of the norm painfully reminded slaves that they did not enjoy the full status of their gender, that they could not count on the "protection"—however constraining and sometimes hypocritical—that surrounded white women" (p. 94). While white women were and continue to be mythologized as pure and vulnerable—in other words, feminine—Black women are conversely associated with negative stereotypes and masculinized traits. This ideology has persisted within popular women's movements, with the

assumption that sexism is separate from racism. By not being explicitly anti-racist, these movements thus perpetuate the notion that femininity is, by default, white.

Yet even in this violent historical context, women practiced resistance. Harriet Jacobs' testimony illustrates one instance in which the hidden transcript was used for this purpose. Jacobs escaped enslavement in North Carolina in various ways, complicating the notion of freedom itself. She later published *Incidents in the Life of A Slave Girl* detailing these escapes. In this memoir, Jacobs (1861) cites the sexual harassment and abuse she was subjected to by her master, among many other forms of violence. She then recounts the seven years she spent in her grandmother's garret space, physically confined yet partially removed from the abuse to which she had been subjected. Jacobs calls this space her "Loophole of Retreat," in which she maintained an active site of resistance while continuing to exist within a different form of confinement that eventually disabled her. Yet Jacobs made clear that the costs of the garret space paled in comparison to the violence she was escaping, calling it the "lesser of evils" and writing that "It seemed horrible to sit or lie in a cramped position day after day...yet I would have chosen this, rather than my lot as a slave" (p. 174). In this recognition and throughout her narrative, the garrett space represents a physical location of resistance. Dr. Jasmine Syedullah, whose theorization of loopholes has influenced this thesis since the beginning, writes:

Jacobs's abolitionism is informed and shaped through her inhabitation of the loophole, a counterpoint to the ethical literacy of political resistance based upon narratives of personal overcoming and self-possession as agency. Jacobs's loophole of retreat invites us to contemplate the merits of retreating from domination while remaining an object of its subjection (2014:4-5).

This analysis recognizes the loophole as an in-between locus that parallels the discourses discussed earlier in the chapter. This lens exposes how Jacobs' garret space acted not only as an individual site of refuge but also a liminal site in between the dominant and hidden transcripts.

Green-Barteet (2013) argues that this hiding place represents an "interstitial space," meaning it is located in an often concealed "in-between." This author contends that Jacobs' testimony is interstitial as well, as it represents an "in-between location, arguably more public than private, in which she is able to discuss private matters, such as motherhood, sexuality, and abuse, in a public forum" (p. 55). While this testimony is distinct from rumor and gossip, it nonetheless represents a similar transcript that is somewhere in between hidden and public. It is this transcript I wish to highlight in this brief discussion of Jacobs.

Jacobs' testimony, written after she permanently escaped enslavement, represents another way in which she resists captivity. I argue that this narrative operates as a transcript of resistance located in the space between public and private (Scott 1990). While she chooses to share her story, she also maintains its disguises--Jacobs writes under a pseudonym and changes the names of everyone she mentions, for example. In this testimony, she introduces pieces of the hidden transcript into the public while maintaining modes of camouflage. This position allowed Jacobs to "shield herself from a readership whose understanding and empathy she could not take for granted" while simultaneously publicizing the violence of slavery (Andrews 2002:106). In this unique position, Green-Barteet argues that Jacobs had the ability to:

Argue against slavery and challenge nineteenth-century domestic ideologies that did not account for enslaved women without offending her audience. Thus, from her interstitial position, Jacobs is able to negotiate the boundaries between the public and private spheres as she tacitly argues that all women, regardless of race, class, or ethnicity, should be guaranteed the same protections that domestic ideology mandates for white, middle- and upper-class women, while also questioning the double standards that marginalized women face (2013:55).

*Incidents* can thus be read as a narrative that exposes the sexual violence against Black women without rendering the narrator herself completely vulnerable to retaliation.

Understanding Jacobs' testimony as a form of resistant discourse located somewhere between the

hidden and public transcripts anchors the theoretical framework I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. I look to Jacobs' memoir as one of the myriad ways in which she, and many others, refuted the inhumane conditions of chattel slavery, including sexual violation. While located in a deeply painful context, this tactic of dissent illuminates the strength and resilience with which women have struggled for physical safety.

Before I fast-forward a century, I want to briefly connect Jacobs' memoir to my earlier discussions of stigmatization and threats to power. This narrative was published in 1861, but it wasn't until 120 years later that it was officially verified (Weekes 2018). This resistance to acceptance of her testimony illustrates the power that such speech carries. By complicating the dominant narrative with her own experiences of extreme violence and abuse, she threatened the hegemonic systems of power that rationalized her containment. Questioning this testimony can then be understood as a strategy of undermining Jacobs' credibility in order to maintain these exact systems of domination.

I chose Jacobs as a focal point because her testimony represents one of the many ways that women have historically used their narratives to facilitate political action, regardless of whether that intent is explicit. I also choose this moment as it illustrates how women's movements variously embrace and contest racist patterns of violence.

Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents* represents one instance of speaking out against sexual violence. 100 years later, the feminist movement popularized a similar analysis by uncovering how gender-based violence is institutionalized to the point of naturalizing these systems of domination. The discourse of sexual harassment is one perspective from which to examine this process.

In the 1970s more women were working, meaning more women were subjected to discrimination and harassment from their employers and coworkers. These women organized against their circumstances, fighting for wage and labor rights as well as offering resources for others in groups such as the 9to5 organization, which still pursues this work today (Bravo, Santa Anna, Meric 2008).

Ellen Bravo (2008) asserts that the invisibility of sexual harassment changed in October 1991 when Anita Hill spoke up about her experiences with Clarence Thomas (p. 202). During his Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Hill testified that Thomas had made inappropriate sexual comments to her as well as shown her pornography. This testimony marks a revolutionary change in our societal understanding of gender-based subordination insofar as it introduced the reality of sexual violence into the public transcript. McKay (1992) writes that "shrouded in centuries of white and Black women's silence, and until recently perhaps spoken only softly behind closed doors in the company of sympathetic women, women's allegations of sexual harassment against men, a behavior that had no name until the 1980s, are probably as old as our civilization" (p. 278). So although Professor Hill was by no means the first woman to tell her story—Harriet Jacobs was one of many before her—her testimony still publicized the hidden transcript and illuminated the abusive treatment of women in the workplace.

At the same time, her identity as a Black woman rendered her illegible to many as there was no common transcript through which to understand Hill's experience. Crenshaw (1992) aptly argues that "because [Anita Hill] was situated within two fundamental hierarchies of social power, the central disadvantage that Hill faced was the lack of available and widely comprehended narratives to communicate the reality of her experience as a Black woman to the world" (p. 404). Her use of non-normative evidence, which in her case was the explicit naming of

sexual acts therefore unprecedented in legal testimony, was in part a tactic of writing this comprehensive narrative. By spelling out the details, Hill communicated to women across the country how her experience was situated in a larger pattern of domination that affects women and women of color first and foremost. This is furthered by Bravo (2008) who witnessed the whisper network in action after Professor Hill spoke up, and attested: "In voices barely above whispers or hoarse with rage, they [women calling in] told their stories. Most just wanted someone to know what they'd experienced; some of the incidents went back four decades" (p. 202). Similarly, in the biopic *Confirmation*, Professor Hill is shown receiving confessional letters from women in an emotional scene in which she crumples beneath the weight of the occasion (Famuyiwa 2016) Thus her speaking out can be understood as an act of resistance instrumental in fostering solidarity and support among survivors of sexual violence.

Yet Hill's racial identity complicated the public response to her testimony. As I discussed in the previous section, the legacy of sexual violence against women of color in the United States can be traced back to slavery and conceptions of femininity. This meant that Hill was subject to the same patterns of dispossession and invalidation that were employed when the public doubted Jacobs' credibility. Anita Hill was not seen as a woman in need of support but instead racialized as deviant and untrustworthy. Clarence Thomas, on the other hand, deflected the scrutiny directed at him by invoking racism and calling the hearings a "high tech lynching" (Miller 1994:118). The complex interaction of race and gender rendered Hill an invisible actor, whose existence as a Black woman contradicted her own testimony of violation. Surrounded by a Senate Judiciary Committee made up entirely of white males, Hill was subject to traumatizing questions that ultimately led to the construction of a dominant narrative in which Thomas was presented as a victim of racism and Hill as a vengeful Black woman who could not be violated.

Despite the efforts of powerful white men to silence and invalidate Professor Hill as she delivered her testimony, it was still consequential. As noted above, Hill inspired others to share their stories for the first time. And her testimony had legal implications as well—it strengthened the legal recourse available for survivors of workplace sexual harassment, and after the hearing, "sexual harassment complaints filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission doubled" (Cohen 2016). Though these represent small gains in the deeply unequal landscape of gender- and race-based subordination, Hill's narrative is a testament to the power of speaking out and revealing what is so often hidden. Just as Jacobs took the risk of sharing her story out of pure necessity, so too did Hill speak truth to power in the public hearing.

These brief forays into history demonstrate the tradition of talking back. By considering women from Jacobs to Hill, I lay out the foundation of resistance on which this thesis is based. I now move more specifically into resistant discourse that fits my earlier definitions of rumor and gossip. Spacks (1985) writes that "history testifies to the persistence and power of gossip as a social mode" in that it "supplies a weapon for outsiders--a weapon appropriately directed at the façade of reputation people construct around themselves" (p. 45). I argue that this weapon can be called a "whisper network." This term has been used in recent years to describe the networks that women use to talk about their experiences with patriarchy and sexual violence. By utilizing unverified, network-based communication, these women make use of non-normative evidence to spread information that complicates the public transcript. The whisper network thus represents a loophole similar to Jacobs' space of retreat or the letters that Hill represents. In Chapter 3, I turn to one manifestation of this network specifically. Now we go to Brown University in 1990, a year before Anita Hill's testimony and decades before the very term 'whisper network' would be used to describe the #MeToo movement and Internet activism. I hope to demonstrate that these



strategies of resistance are nothing new and must be theorized together with many other instances of dissent.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE BROWN RAPE LIST

In October 2017, Moira Donegan anonymously shared a Google spreadsheet called “Shitty Media Men” (Shafir 2017). The spreadsheet had a simple goal: to compile a list of men working in media who had harassed or assaulted women. The rules were similarly sparse, instructing women to submit anonymously, to never name an accuser, and to never share the document with a man. As the list went viral, certain names turned red—those who had been accused by multiple women. In the 24 hours that the link was live, it offered women space to not only share their own experiences but to also access the testimony of others. It wasn’t perfect—the document itself had a disclaimer to take all accusations with a grain of salt—but it offered a refuge, where women could collectively help each other navigate their workspaces. Reminiscent of the same sites of resistance theorized at length in the previous chapter, the spreadsheet represented a discourse in between hidden and public as it contested the dominant narrative by spreading anonymous information in a relatively discreet way. At the same time, this discourse represented a threat, spurring widespread backlash.

While intended to keep women safe, the spreadsheet link went viral; the day after it was shared, its popularity prompted its creator to take the link offline. The resource was meant to be shared, but not beyond a certain network. As it blew up online, so did the reactions of those who didn’t benefit from the list’s existence. Men who had been named began to speak out, citing the suffering the list incurred—indeed, in the weeks and months following the spreadsheet, many of those who had been named were fired, put on probation, or investigated by their workplaces. Some were eventually prosecuted. And it was not just these men speaking out—across the Internet, social media was abuzz with commentary on the spreadsheet.

Amidst all the noise, a distinct analysis was being formed by those who had used the spreadsheet or taken part in similar modes of resistant communication. Their analysis centered on the idea of the 'whisper network' mentioned in the previous chapter, precipitating the use of that term in popular media. But the story of whisper networks is much older.

27 years before the Shitty Media Men spreadsheet, evidence of a similar whisper network was emerging at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. In this chapter, I explore the historical emergence of that whisper network in a case called the Brown Rape List, or BRL. This case study builds on the theory I established in the previous two chapters, examining how women use stigmatized discourse to resist domination. In this chapter, I argue that studying the trajectory of whisper networks is imperative to understanding their impact on contemporary issues, such as the aforementioned spreadsheet. I additionally argue that the use of rumor and gossip enabled women at Brown to maintain a whisper network that increased their safety in the face of sexual violence.

I will first look to primary sources, including articles from *The Brown Daily Herald* and interviews with students involved, to describe the list itself. I will then move to an analysis of the impact of this event, including contemporary reflections on its significance. I will finally synthesize this example within my theoretical framework, arguing that it follows in the history of resistance I discussed in the last chapter.

In October of 1990, a student at Brown University made a decision. Like too many women, she had been the victim of sexual violence. Yet there was little available recourse—sexual assault was not even in the student code of conduct at Brown at the time. And, as has been noted by students and administrators alike, no one in a place to do anything about it was listening (Brown 1990). So she did what girls have been taught to do our whole lives: whisper about it. In

the women's bathroom of the John D. Rockefeller Library, she took a permanent marker and wrote a sentence that changed not only how we think about rape politics, but also prompted us to consider the role of institutions in mitigating interpersonal harm.

The woman wrote the name of her assaulter in permanent marker on the bathroom wall. Over the next few months, more and more women began using this safe space she had created. The bathroom stall became a conversation, where names were shared alongside empathetic comments, help-hotline phone numbers, and words of encouragement.

The list on the wall remained secret for a while, as the women likely wanted it to be—the reason the wall *worked* was that its location protected it from scrutiny, retaliation, or rewriting. As Scott (1990) notes, "social spaces where the hidden transcript grows are themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power" (p. 119). The women at Brown claimed this stall as such a site; even as custodians kept scrubbing the markers away, eventually painting the stall walls black to dissuade graffiti, they kept writing.

The controversy surrounding the list after it was eventually made public prompted administrative action at Brown, and by the end of that academic year, a clause on the consequences of sexual assault had been added to the disciplinary code. But accepting this result as the end of the story misses the critical details in the process. Because this thesis looks at communication as an alternative form of resistance, I want to focus on the women involved and their network more than the institutional changes that resulted. The effect of the rape list on University policy is a critical piece of the narrative, but focusing only on these changes would mean overlooking the experiences of the women involved, including why they were compelled to make a list in the first place.

To that end, I organize this chapter in subsections titled after direct quotes from the rape list in the Rockefeller Library. These statements include personal testimony, supportive responses, anger, and judgment. The various sentiments reflect the campus climate responsible for the list's existence, and eventually its destruction. Within these subsections, I turn to news media on the rape list for the bulk of my analysis. The *Brown Daily Herald* archives from the 1990s contain myriad op-eds and letters to the editors from students expressing differing judgments on the list. These contributions allow for an analysis rich in student voices.

*Only a few women saw the list. Only a few rapists were listed. But rape affects EVERYONE.  
TAKE ACTION NOW!*

On October 31, 1990, a student named Sianne Ngai broke the story of the rape list in the *Brown Daily Herald* in a reaction to the call to 'TAKE ACTION NOW.' (Ngai 1990:15). This decision to publicize the list came after much deliberation. As a student herself, Ngai wrote that she was "afraid any printed discussion of a semi-private, collaborative effort between women to identify sexual offenders would be perceived as a betrayal" (1990:11). But she knew that as a student with access to the school newspaper and the bathroom stall, she was in a unique position to publicize the problem that so many women were whispering about. In her piece for the *Herald*, Ngai conveys the gravity of sexual assault to the campus, citing the extreme measures that women have taken for their own safety. In this way, she contextualizes the list for what it was—a show of solidarity among women whose University was failing to support them. In telling this story, Ngai (1990) identifies the institutional forces that relegated these women's stories to graffiti in the first place, writing that they had "obviously chose[n] to express their fear and anger by writing in a women's bathroom, a place that excludes men, because they could not

speak out in public” (p. 11). In her decision to cover the story in all its nuance, Ngai maintained the agency of the women involved and therefore complicated the narrative about sexual violence that Brown administrators had been perpetuating in the months past.

The list arose within a context of university incompetence when it came to handling sexual violence. In a piece she wrote over twenty years after the BRL story broke, former student Jesselyn Radack (2014) notes that “what did *not* make the front-page news was that for years women had tried to bring charges against many of these same men through official channels” (p. 77). What she highlights here is how the University produced the conditions for the list by failing to provide adequate avenues of support within the institution, even with consistent pressure from the women who advocated for themselves. This advocacy was not always without effect—the summer before this semester, an outside consultant evaluated Brown’s handling of sexual assault and in September an advocate program and Campus Incident Complaint Form were rolled out (Kahn 1990). Yet these strides were not enough to change circumstances for women on campus, whose experiences of sexual violence continued to be trivialized. In Radack’s case specifically, then-Dean of Students David Inman said he “lacked the authority to punish any offense sexual in nature because, at that point, no explicit provision prohibiting sexual misconduct existed in the Code of Student Conduct.” (Brown 2000:78). He then decided to punish the men accused, after they confessed, with extra laps at football practice as recommended by the coach. This example epitomizes the role that the Brown administration had in maintaining a public transcript of fairness while engaging in acts of domination by silencing or sanitizing discourse that could threaten power and failing to actually transform the culture that normalized this violence. Radack writes that many of her friends experienced the same administrative dismissal she had when they spoke out, prompting students to work with numerous deans in an attempt to make changes to

the system. Yet their input was continuously ignored and dismissed. It was within this context that students took to the wall.

### *Warn others*

As I discussed in Chapter 2, hidden transcripts represent spaces in which to contest and critique domination when public transcripts render it invisible. I argue that the bathroom wall initially represented such a private space, where those construed as powerless and invisible could retreat from the structures that produced their circumstances. Ngai (1990) says as much in the beginning of her article breaking the story, writing that “this graffiti is not just graffiti. It is neither disorganized or vague; it has an extremely specific purpose: the six or seven names on the back of this stall are the names of alleged male sexual offenders written by anonymous women with the intent of warning other women.” (p. 15). Ngai critically recognizes how this stall represented an instance in which survivors reclaimed agency by supporting each other within an institution that did not. Radack similarly describes the bathroom stall as the “only means of expression in an institution that had systematically silenced [the] voices” of survivors (Brown 2000:80). These perspectives locate the list itself as a hidden transcript insofar as it functioned on behalf of a network of women trying to keep themselves, and each other, safe. As such, I understand the bathroom stall as a site of agency by and for women affected by sexual violence, not a political strategy to pressure the administration nor an attempt to terrorize men.

The privacy of the Brown Rape List additionally marks its status as a hidden transcript. Navigating the creation of a safe space within an oppressive climate gives double meaning to the liminal space of the women’s bathroom and the anonymous list contained within. Consider the words of one woman in a letter to the editor in the *Brown Daily Herald*:

Ngai also criticized the women for creating graffiti in a bathroom which excludes men. *But that's the point*: the public space that is inclusive of men and women—the public space of this campus, for example—has excluded and denigrated these women. The women's bathroom is the perfect space for the graffiti about Brown rapists because, in that space, their voices can be heard. I hope the rape and assault survivors continue to write their comments despite the nightly ritual erase of their words. (Tanenbaum 1990:10)

Tanenbaum's response to the original article problematizes the notion that this list was created for the consumption of those outside its network, which would be espoused by the media as soon as the story was broken. Instead, she asserts that the value of the list is linked with its discreet location and practice. By defending the list even as it was erased nightly, students were able to maintain a network of communication that facilitated solidarity and support. One woman reported that "the list helped her meet with other alleged victims of the same attacker" indicating how it served as a network in which unofficial communication produced spaces for healing (Schwartz 1990). Even students and faculty who critiqued the wall as a strategy recognized this truth. In a piece about freedom of expression in the *Brown Daily Herald*, one professor wrote that "in many ways the graffiti in the Rock's women's room is greatly empowering. Before considering its appropriateness and the potential for abusing it, it is important to recognize what an important and perhaps valuable release it has been" (Whitney 1990:11).

The voices of these women are central to the story of the rape list, which is often rewritten as a political strategy from radical feminists and misandrists. Following the arguments of these students, I contend that the purpose of the list was instead to maintain a whisper network that protected its participants. With this foundational understanding of why the list arose, the reaction to its existence becomes more complex.



*Be Careful. You could be ruining these men's lives.*

It took two weeks after Ngai's article for the story to get picked up by *The New York Times* and receive national scrutiny, but by that time the extra coverage was unnecessary at Brown: the campus had been in an uproar since the story broke in the *Herald*. Much of this backlash, unsurprisingly, came from men. But it was not just the men who had been named who were angry—it was also the administration. These reactions demonstrate how, as soon as the BRL moved from a hidden transcript to something publicly discussed, it presented a threat to hegemonic systems of domination. In response to this threat, dominant groups worked diligently to destabilize the narratives that revealed sexual violence and its mishandling at Brown University.

Of the many press reports and comments from University officials after Ngai broke the story, a few stand out in infamy. One was from executive vice president Robert Reichley, who called the list "anti-male" and the women involved "Magic Marker terrorists" (Schmich 1990). By labeling them "terrorists," Reichley effectively invalidated the narratives of the women. This choice of words preempted any reaction to the allegations themselves by immediately presenting the women as disingenuous and dangerous. And in his disavowal of the list, Reichley reproduces the conditions of silencing and stigmatization that had made it necessary in the first place. His words can also be interpreted as a response to the disruption in power structures that the list incurred. By claiming their own space of resistance within an institution that did not willingly provide it, these women threatened those in power, and as such were immediately dismissed as invalid and untrue.

Another questionable decision on behalf of the administration was their choice to help out men who had been accused. A report in the student newspaper a year after the list says that “David Inman, the Dean of Students, sent letters to the accused students which informed them of the rape allegations and gave them the option of filing an official complaint” (Su 1991:3). I couldn’t find a copy of this letter, but its alleged contents seem to indicate how well the accused men were treated in the wake of the list. Especially when compared to the treatment of women involved, who were threatened with expulsion should their identities be discovered, the administrative response indicates a clear favoring of men's voices. These actions reified the traditional status of men at the University by immediately assuming their innocence and thus putting the credibility of women into question, quickly reversing any shifts in power that the list catalyzed.

With control of the dominant narrative, men high up in the Brown administration quickly rewrote the incident to vilify the women involved, as demonstrated in Reichley's statement. Their defense—that there was no proof—may have had merit; but neither was there any proof that the women were lying, yet the administration still took the side of the men. This decision on behalf of the administration is consistent with their history of favoring men’s narratives when women *did* come forward, as previously noted. One professor, upon reading an editorial asserting that “it could be well that the power of the list, the emotions that lead to writing a name on the wall, make it virtually impossible to write an innocent man's name on the wall,” (Mathiesen 1990) decided to refute that point in the *Herald*. Mathiesen (1990) used the example of witch hunts to illustrate his point, writing that witch hunters themselves “asserted that no accusation of witchcraft brought against any person could ever be false since God would never permit so great an evil to be visited on any innocent person” (p. 18). Using this historical case, the professor

boldly compares *witches* to the men named, warning that trust in human nature may lead to "the same kinds of injustices" as in witchcraft. This example in particular is striking, given that the witch hunts were, in large part, a genocide of peasant women. One student response cites this history, writing that "the practice of witch hunting created a mechanism for hegemonic institutions to contain women seen as deviant because often they were trying to carve out autonomous, independent, or self-empowering spheres...." Her analysis sharply highlights how the institutional response to the rape list ignores systems of power, writing "I do not see [the men listed] as victims of a hegemonic institution which is trying to constrain their autonomy, or their self expression" (Benson 1990:13). This quote encapsulates how University reactions to the list were not neutral, but instead in line with a larger patriarchal allegiance.

This power dynamic afforded men an outlet to push back against the complaints, even though the anonymity of the authors rendered those complaints useless. With this support, women were dissuaded from coming forward officially because the dominant narrative had already presented them as unbelievable and insincere.

*How can I not be afraid?*

In addition to an official response from the University, students were also vocal in the weeks and months after the list was made public. Using the *Brown Daily Herald*, those named in the list and their allies published their opinions for the campus to see. For instance, one student who had been accused wrote to the *Herald* three days after the original article, saying: "I am writing today because I am angry and confused: angry that someone has falsely accused me of a crime that I find despicable and detestable, and confused because I fail to see the point of this list" (Downes 1990:18). He goes on to condemn the list's existence. Immediately, the logic isn't quite

evident—anyone who understands the gravity of sexual assault is also capable of imagining how whispers about the topic may be useful. Other statements were similarly naive, as students who acknowledged the problem of sexual assault simultaneously invalidated the women who had shared their experiences on the wall. One man, whose friend had been accused, shared the following:

Each time a man on that list speak with a woman, he has to wonder if she thinks of him as a potential rapist. My friend goes through this every time he sees a woman at Brown. Why? What has he done? Nothing. He has never been accused of sexual assault or harassment by anyone nor has he committed any such acts ( Richter 1990:13).

This example of the pain incurred by the list ignores how women who were actually assaulted feel on campus when they encounter their assaulters. Presenting this narrative without reflection ignores the unequal power held by the groups involved as it assumes that they are similarly vulnerable to harm. I do not mean to say that labels themselves are productive; instead, I believe that the sentiments expressed by men in the wake of the list's emergence indicate their attitudes towards sexual assault survivors in general. Other men similarly spoke of their indignation and desire for vindication, often justifying the list as malice, a “fluke,” or rumor (Moss 1990:12). As has been discussed in previous chapters, the label of rumor or gossip seeks to delegitimize what is often the productive and solidarity-building work of a marginalized group. As the hidden transcript became public in the form of whispered resistance, these stigmatizing labels served to undermine its credibility.

The general response to the rape list was additionally emblematic of deeper hypocrisy. While it is not widely reported on, several people have subsequently come forward to describe a list created in response to the BRL: an alternative roster titled “women who deserve to be raped” (Brown 2000:85). This response is, to say the least, violent. The roster represents a window into the usually private and more honest discourse that comprises the hidden transcript of men. It is

also directly antithetical to the dominant critique of the list, which maintained that the form was in and of itself unsafe and should be erased. It was physically erased every night after its ‘discovery,’ due to the University’s official opinion that it constituted slander and misandry rather than anything positive. And this condemnation was supported by more categorical statements, such as when executive Vice President Reichley said that the University would no more tolerate anti-male graffiti than allow misogynistic, homophobic or racist graffiti (Jacobs 1990) (a statement that is simply not true, as evidenced by the men’s list). Students also wrote to the *Herald* expressing anger that lists like “campus sluts” and “loose bitches” were “all over campus” and had persisted for years without any administrative or custodial action (Brown and Lahiff 1990). By admonishing women for their chosen form of communication but allowing men to use the same methods with a much more violent message, the University perpetuates a narrative in which women are dangerous or dishonest while men can at least be counted on to tell the truth.

In the months before the BRL, there were several incidents of campus graffiti reported in the *Herald*. But none of them garnered the same reaction as the rape list. In those other cases, the graffiti had expressed anti-Semitism and racism. Obviously these were, and are, very real issues, and many students were spurred into action by the event. But in these cases, there is no indication that the University sent a letter to all of those targeted by the hate speech giving them the option to file an official complaint. It is specifically the disruption of power in the case of the BRL that made its reception unique. Other writing, though inarguably offensive, operated on behalf of those with different types of privilege. The hate was directed at groups with less systemic power, and so while it was certainly threatening, it did not garner such an explosive reaction as in the BRL. By responding to the list with immediate criticism and disavowal, the

University was effectively rewriting the dominant transcript that had been threatened by the women's testimony.

After the BRL was publicized, it became associated with two problems: the hurt feelings and reputations of the men who had been named, and the logistics of how to permanently erase the graffiti from the stall doors. The latter became ever more frustrating as the list spread to multiple buildings. Women who had been denied support from the institution had found it themselves, only to have it made public, condemned, and systematically erased. This backlash rendered the list unverifiable. In this way, in addition to operating through networks and threatening power, I argue that the public response to the list stigmatized it as gossip. The myriad negative statements from the administration and media undermined the testimony of these women by presenting it as untrue. This is how the hidden transcript survives when it moves into the public—by maintaining strategies of anonymity and disguise, sometimes by choice but often imposed by dominant narratives.

Nevertheless, the label of gossip did not prevent the whispers from having an impact.

Goldberg (2019) writes:

the role of whisper networks in resisting patriarchal power is particularly evident in gossip that transitions easily from discussion of harassers, to strategies of avoidance, to complaining, about how difficult it is to do anything about men in such positions of consolidated power...in voicing a moral opposition to these structures [of patriarchy] and the behaviors they permit, whisper networks contest sexual harassment on a symbolic level and thereby coordinate actual resistance to its occurrence" (P. 9).

This space of discourse led to tangible improvements for students at Brown within the institution and it also provided them alternative support, such as graffiti with numbers for help hotlines or the name of a trustworthy counselor. The lesson here is that gossip can be effective in catalyzing social change, but it is never a straight path forward. It is within this context that I argue for a reinterpretation of gossip and the legacy of the whisper network.

*Don't let this get washed away. Fight.*

In the weeks and months following the list, Brown University did revise its policies on sexual assault and change the Student Code of Conduct. The administration also began to develop a one-hour training session on sexual assault as part of new student orientation. By moving forward in this way, the university sparked a larger movement in which schools finally responded to the voices of their students. But we must not forget that the original intent of the list was not to achieve policy change. It couldn't have been, because it was not supposed to be known about. I argue that the network was not so much a political strategy as a mode of survival. Ultimately, it afforded women a space in which to practice care and engage in collective struggle. When we understand the BRL as a primarily political strategy, we appropriate the narratives and agency of these women, just as calling their testimony rumor or gossip renders it unimportant.

*Keep this list going strong*

Brown University was not the only school with a bathroom rape list. In the months after the incident, media coverage began to appear about other schools with similar situations. In different spaces across the country, groups were finding safe spaces to come together and offer healing and validating words. The ensuing years also saw an increase in sexual assault support services and awareness on college campuses and beyond. In the year following the list, Anita Hill's testimony would additionally impact the attention afforded to sexual assault and harassment in institutions that had historically ignored it.

The list is not isolated to the '90s. Before it happened at Brown, there were doubtless countless iterations of the list at different campuses and among different communities. And in the time since, as universities change, women are still navigating their own spaces within social inequality. Columbia University had an incident of a rape list in 2014. The students involved testified that one of the most difficult parts of making the list was the physical act of avoiding surveillance. Three of them stated:

The most important thing was understanding the incredible extent of the university's surveillance of those who challenge them....We couldn't use Columbia email accounts or Columbia WiFi ... and we had to be extremely careful about navigating the cameras that the university has placed everywhere on campus (Joseph and Swaine 2014).

In the face of these difficulties, the women took to the walls to protect each other. These students, like those at Brown, argued that the "audience was not the media, but the women on this campus who might be targeted by these men." When the list was discovered, a backlash was again galvanized against the women with threats of "criminal charges, defamation suits, administrative sanctioning, student backlash, the list goes on and on." Each and every time the hidden transcript is made visible, it has lasting impacts on policy and societal understandings of different issues, but it is also rendered invalid because of this potential to change. Yet as the words of this transcript are published, erased, painted over, rewritten, and marked illegible, it survives in the in-between. The whisper network does not necessarily stop when it becomes voiced to the public but instead adapts. I believe that this ethic of resistance and persistence is central to the reason that whisper networks can exist in the first place.

I now move forward and examine another iteration of the Brown Rape List. This one emerged recently, in the midst of the #MeToo movement. But rather than existing in a bathroom stall, it took the form of a Google spreadsheet. I use this difference as a starting point from which to understand the potential downfalls of these networks and lists.



## CHAPTER FOUR: SHITTY MEDIA MEN

In 2006 Tarana Burke founded Me Too, an organization for survivors of sexual violence, with the intention of providing resources especially for women and girls of color (The MeToo Movement). Eleven years later, in October, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted the term with the following message: if you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." Within 24 hours, the hashtag #metoo had been used more than 12 million times on Facebook, and was at the top of the trending list on other platforms as well ("More than 12M 'Me Too' Facebook posts." 2017). This was all occurring just days after the *New York Times* broke the story accusing Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment and assault, disrupting the façade of Hollywood. As celebrities finally shared their experiences with the public, and people around the world did the same thing online, it was difficult to fully comprehend the meaning of this silence-breaking as it happened.

Yet what has been evident to me since the #MeToo movement went viral is how it facilitated and solidified networks of support. When one person spoke out, others who had been waiting to tell the same story felt empowered to come forward. Together, they publicized narratives that finally showed the extent to which these secrets had been kept. This process led to networks of support such as when nine women who had never met all accused the same playwright of sexual misconduct. Afterward, they began to form connections—one of the women described it as "spinning our individual pain into solidarity" (Bennett 2018). This is one of the myriad examples in which the #MeToo movement produced support for women who had not been able to share their stories alone. With the aid of social media especially, this movement

gained traction quickly. Rentschler (2014) argues that the “use of social media produces, organizes and deploys a capacity to respond to cultures of harassment and sexual violence, building a larger network of response-ability that incorporates others situated in proximity to cultures of harassment, sexualized intimidation, and violence” (p. 69). By locating part of their resistance online, either with the use of a hashtag, an anonymous confession or by bearing witness, women who use the whisper network are able to defend more space in which to practice dissent.

It was in the midst of the burgeoning #MeToo movement that a woman named Moira Donegan used new strategies of social media to (re)create an old practice. On a Wednesday in October, she publicly posted a Google spreadsheet titled “Shitty Media Men.” Similar to the list at Brown, the spreadsheet compiled anonymous accusations, ranging from detailed descriptions of assault to inappropriate remarks, against coworkers. The spreadsheet was public, but the link was meant to be circulated only among those whom it could protect. And in the hours after it went live, the document became a site not unlike the bathroom stall at Brown. The creation of this space facilitated critiques of power insofar as it gave women the chance to share their stories, and in turn, find validation in the experiences of others. Men who had been named more than once were highlighted in red, and even the list’s first critic writes that “I saw some of the names and thought: *fucking finally*” (Shafrir 2017). By opening up a space in which this validation could happen, the spreadsheet produced a similar culture of care and accountability as the rape list at Brown.

Yet there is a limit to the comparisons that can be made between the Brown Rape List and Shitty Media Men. Yes, each deployed a whisper network in order to protect women, but the role of social media in the latter makes it distinct. Within a day of posting the link, the threat of

negative backlash compelled Donegan to take it offline. At the time she had not yet come forward as the list's creator but reflects on feeling overwhelmed in the hours after posting the spreadsheet, as she watched row after row fill up with names (Tolentino 2017). Before long, the link didn't work anymore—but within a digital space, that carried little meaning. Unlike at Brown, where even if the list in the stall was rewritten it could always be erased, Shitty Media Men was immediately reposted in screenshots. Multiple versions of it still exist today, naming dozens of men in devastating testimony of sexualized violence. Reading this list myself, I maintain that it represents a loophole of subversion within the context of workplace sexual harassment and assault. Yet I recognize that it is imperfect—by existing online, the list is immediately vulnerable to sabotage.

A day after Donegan posted the spreadsheet, a reporter at BuzzFeed wrote a story pointing to its existence. While not explicitly for or against the list, Shafrir (2017) criticized its methods of including multiple types of sexualized transgressions, writing “things do get complicated when you start lumping all of this behavior together in a big anonymous spreadsheet of unsubstantiated allegations against dozens of named men—who were not given the chance to respond—that, by Wednesday night, seemed to have spread far and wide.” What Shafrir is describing is a whisper network but with a twist—one that, by existing digitally within the age of social media, can “take on a life of [its] own.” Without explicitly saying so, she questions the risks of making a hidden transcript public, specifically in such an accessible and permanent form.

Similar responses demonstrate the common conception that the spreadsheet rendered the whisper network an entirely different beast. Kircher (2017) writes that “the shitty-men-in-media list has always existed. It's just that prior to this week it didn't exist in the form of an open-

source spreadsheet viewable by anyone with the right link....The internet has given what was once decentralized gossip and rumor a shape and stable home” (Kircher 2017). Here, she recognizes the importance of rumor and gossip in these networks but argues that the role of social media renders them too vulnerable.

These reactions to the spreadsheet critique its vulnerability to false information. Yet, if traditional whisper networks operate through gossip, rumor, and other subversive forms, aren’t they also unverifiable and thus similarly vulnerable? Cauterucci (2017) writes that the “barrier to entry for writing on the list is low to nonexistent, leaving it open to hijacking and reducing the trustworthiness of every bit of information to that of any other anonymous online comment.” Here, she critically notes how the anonymity of Shitty Media Men surpassed that of the Brown Rape List or other whisper networks; in non-digital manifestations, these loopholes of resistance are more easily guarded. At Brown, the list moved from bathroom to bathroom even after its existence was made public. This rendered it a shifting site of concealment that by virtue of its location could not be easily infiltrated by saboteurs. Even if it was gossip, the women privy to the list could assume the allegations were put there in good faith. Yet Shitty Media Men was not located in such a context. Tolentino (2017) writes:

The network can be manipulated toward falsehood, but we know how to take that into account: we ask around, monitor social situations, shut down the rare false rumor. An open online document is not governed by the same moral physics—it’s governed by the physics of the Internet...There is no reason, in a vacuum, to take a single claim on the spreadsheet as true. But, as with the bathroom-wall system, people producing and receiving anonymous information don’t do so in a vacuum. When accusations are lodged in unconventional and unregulated ways online—and this will surely keep on happening—there is a built-in imperative to triangulate the information with what we know in real life.

By recognizing the vulnerability of the list without discounting the merit of unverifiable information and gossip, Tolentino convincingly argues that part of Shitty Media Men’s downfall

was, in fact, the anonymity that placed it outside of necessary context. If the integrity of traditional whisper networks is maintained simply by women believing each other, the online space of Donegan's spreadsheet made this intimate process much less possible because it was so public. Cauteracci (2017) writes that "if rape and assault allegations can be brushed off as gossip from sources that can't be held accountable for their reports, it throws a layer of doubt on all the accusations on the list, many of which are truly horrifying." I argue that rape and assault allegations can always be brushed off as gossip, on or offline. The difference is that the sequestered sites of subversion in which these networks operate are usually understood differently by those inside versus outside of it. Just as the hidden transcript operates by default through exclusion, so is the integrity of gossip constituted by those who spread it. Bringing us back to the idea of stigmatization, this indicates that the decision to brush something off as gossip is one made by outsiders. For those within these networks, we can understand gossip as unverifiable inasmuch as it employs non-normative evidence—yet we also recognize the value in believing each other. By removing any indication of who that other is, the anonymity and publicity of Shitty Media Men changed that crucial component of whisper networks.

One of the takeaways from Shitty Men in Media is that the rise of social media has fooled our instincts about what is considered private and public. In the hybrid space of online, it is more difficult than ever to ensure the hidden transcript does not become public. Yet facilitating intimacy is perhaps easier than ever—with the click of a button, it is possible to share our stories and compile our gossiped evidence without considering what the implications might be, such as the potential backlash that such a conversation might incite. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does mean that what might start as a sincere effort of protection can become publicized and discussed to the point that its original intention is lost. As our activism becomes more and more

digital, it is imperative to consider how to best prioritize and maintain what should be kept hidden.

## CONCLUSION

So far in this thesis I have argued in defense of rumor and gossip as it is used to communicate within whisper networks. To do this, I navigated two case studies that made use of these clandestine forms of communication to resist sexual violence. Expanding my focus in light of everything I've said above, I define rumor and gossip as political tools that directly contradict official and verifiable knowledge by circulating alternative information. The political nature of these modes is exemplified in stories from the past as well as today's headlines—consider Brett Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings, for example, or the deployment of the term “fake news” by the current presidential administration. Gossip and rumor represent part of the battle fought between the hidden and public transcripts, and are dismissed or stigmatized by those in power to neutralize protest. As such I consider these modes of communication to be strategic forms of dissent for women facing sexual violence, yet I do not argue that they are perfect. Too often, these methods of survival and protection are co-opted and turned into narratives about the dishonesty and cattiness of women. In this conclusion, I briefly discuss their limitations. I then assert my own ideas about moving forward.

Many of the dominant arguments against whisper networks, especially in list form, work to diminish their power by highlighting their flaws. One of these perceived flaws, as I've mentioned extensively, is their credibility. I have argued that this does not negate the power of whisper networks, as those included within them may base credibility on non-normative standards of evidence (like gossip) that nonetheless maintain integrity. Yet while they are fundamental to the safety of some women, it is worth asking who is excluded by these lists, or what happens when they fail.

In both of my case studies, I examined the critiques of power developed within already-privileged institutions. Within any system of violence these spaces of refuge are necessary and warranted, but by focusing on the resistance of some, I risk silencing the experiences of others. There are countless women who are not included in the lists I discussed here. In the case of Shitty Media Men, for example, the participants in the whisper network were primarily women working in media in New York. But what of the other women who interact with the named men in different capacities every day? Grady (2008) writes that "digital whisper networks replicate the problems of their analog counterparts: They are made available only to certain people, and disproportionately exclude women who are not plugged into the New York media social scene, especially women of color." While these lists can be incredibly important for some women, they also necessarily exclude others. Similarly, college-aged women who are not in school are much more likely to be assaulted, yet do not have access to the same networks as students might, e.g. Facebook groups or student organizations (Rennison 2014). How do we ensure safety without relying on a transcript that is by very definition exclusive? And what does justice for women look like if we consider not only sexual violence, but also race- and class-based oppression? I do not have answers to these questions, but they are critical considerations that we must hold as we navigate through our own networks of resistance.

In addition to their credibility, whisper networks are also criticized for failing to address the root problem of sexual violence. This is absolutely true; neither rumor nor gossip are adequate strategies for changing the structural inequalities that harm women. Jeong (2018) discusses how, while whisper networks might be protective for some, they do not actually address the behavior of perpetrators. In fact, they may inflict harm by stigmatizing these men to the point of isolation. In these situations, abusers are not held accountable or compelled to



change and grow. Instead, it may perpetuate the problem by inciting shame, anger, or resentment. Obviously, the problem of sexual violence is so grave that it absolutely may be worth risking such outcomes in order to keep each other safe. Yet it is important to maintain a vision of justice that is not focused on punishment or stigmatization, but instead collective growth and change. Ideally, rumor and gossip would not be necessary.

But we do not live in a perfect world. Gossip and rumor might be some of the best tools we have. So, just like I told my best friend my sophomore year, I will continue to gossip, and the whispers will continue to network.

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